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BOOK REVIEW

Unearthing the Optics of War

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Implicit to the aerial view of life on the ground is the achievement of critical distance. By imaginatively or technologically elevating our perspective above the landscape we render our vision panoptic. We can see all. Altitude furthermore begets an objectivity that erases the extraneous details and affects of grounded existence. This disinterested gestalt enables everything of importance to be seen and comprehended in a glance. Such all-at-once-ness constitutes a *coup d'oeil*, a masterful visual predicate for military command of the terrain arrayed below.

Such are the conceits that Caren Kaplan seeks to demolish in her closely read, interpretively nuanced critique of the militarised aerial view. Journeying across centuries and topographies, she breaks down diverse visual practices and politics. Presuming rather than foregrounding our current apprehensions about networked drone surveillance, Kaplan's historically rich examples target the teleology of the "God's-eye" through line' which sustains 'a highly selective, mystified narrative of modern war' (209). She focuses not on aerial reconnaissance in combat contexts, but instead explores the visual projections that emerge from – and sustain – the asymmetric aftermaths of warfare. In particular, Kaplan's mission is to collide what is archived with what remains unseen in aerial views, illustrating their reliance on presumptively hegemonic state power in nominally post-war settings.

Aerial Aftermaths is no mere encyclopaedic catalogue of militarised airborne optics. Rather, it presents a series of scrupulously selective case studies. Commencing with the ground-based First Military Survey of Scotland (1747–55), subsequent chapters consider the early balloonists of the late eighteenth century, the emergence of painted panoramas for British civic entertainment into the nineteenth century, aerial photography in Iraq after World War I, and artistic appropriation of views from above in depicting the modern Middle East. In each circumstance Kaplan delves deeply into the nature of representational practice, unpacking its

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techniques and technologies to ask what they reveal and conceal. Critically, she argues, the ‘evacuation of the human figure from most aerial imaging is a given’ (23), a point first demonstrated in her introductory account of the ‘spectacular aftermaths’ (21) of the events of 11 September 2001.

It is not merely pictures of people that vanish as the ground recedes. Central to the book’s genius is Kaplan’s phenomenology of human presence. She meditates in detail upon the ‘unruly intensities’ (19) that resist both the totalizing aerial view and attempts to empty space through cartographic, photographic or digital depictions. After putting down the Jacobite Rebellion (1745–46), British surveyors sought to transform the Scottish Highlands via a novel map—one that took the ‘God’s-eye’ view to render the country as pacified, vacant and ripe for the dominion of infrastructure. Yet its very practices relied upon walking the ground, interacting with local informants and sectioning the terrain through surveying instruments. All were directly affected by the unfamiliar climate and topography, as well as the resentment and suffering of dispossessed Highlanders, reminding us ‘that war registers its effects across varied tempos and spatial scales that cannot be neatly sorted into “before,” “during,” and “after” or even “here” and “there”’ (35).

If such aftermaths were implicit in the British campaign, they also played out in the resultant survey map that blanked out local peoples, histories and meanings. Although not explicitly stated, these voids beckoned Georgian Britons to transform the Highlands from spaces into places: into property to be properly occupied by urbanisation, proto-industrial ventures and intensified agricultural exploitation. The irony, Kaplan suggests, was that mapping this abstraction of a neutered landscape underplayed its intangible and physical challenges to British occupation on the ground.

In part, Kaplan’s task is to remap such omissions. Considering each technology within its historical trajectory, she asks what work is done by its particular erasures and oversights. The spectacular aftermaths of 9/11, for instance, remain reliant upon a twinned elision. There are no bodies. As Kaplan argues, this is a dual misrepresentation. Although the destruction of the World Trade Center towers represented an unprecedented attack from above, the looped aerial views of the tragedy spare us the distress of dwelling upon its individual casualties. This generalised vulnerability of ‘civilisation’ serves as a powerful justification for what Derek Gregory terms the ‘everywhere war’. Conversely, the (American) visual narrative of 9/11 is rarely paired with its rapid and aggressive riposte in Afghanistan. This retributory bombing campaign itself remains almost entirely absent from the visual record of 2001. The few images that do circulate empty Afghan terrain not merely of civilian victims, but of any trace of indigenous ‘civilisation’. Thus the ‘ever narrowing registers’ of recycled aerial imagery ‘generate “unseens” in tremendous profusion as the iconic “seens” settle into monumental commemoration’ (21).

Although she refers to them in passing, I wish that Kaplan had lingered longer on the other diminishing sites of 9/11: the field in Pennsylvania where the hijacked Flight 93 crashed to earth, and the substantial damage done to the Pentagon by the fourth airliner commandeered that day. The closure of US airspace immediately after the attacks severely curtailed non-state surveillance of these locations. This limited aerial archive—in tandem with formal and voluntary censorship—has consistently skewed the 9/11 script away from America’s military vulnerability and the profound limitations of its pre-attack optics. Such an analysis would have strengthened Kaplan’s central argument that the *coup d’oeil* remains a fantasy and that aerial reconnaissance never equates to omnipotence.

The omnipresence of a Western wartime mentality, however, remains a contestable element within the central chapters of *Aerial Aftermaths*. Spanning the early decades of balloon flight and the protracted Napoleonic Wars, the turn of the nineteenth century certainly witnessed mobilisation and militarisation on a hitherto unprecedented scale—at least in European context. In discussing balloon vision and panoramas, Kaplan follows Saree Makdisi in proposing that occidental subjectivity was increasingly shaped by a presumptive military and naval hegemony. Entangled in the flux of the material goods of empire and the everpresence of colonial conflicts far from ‘home’, ‘[d]eclared and undeclared wars generated not only differences in the moment but lingering affective aftermaths’ (116). This apperception, Kaplan suggests, fed into the ways in which balloonists and metropolitan audiences consumed and interpreted aerial perspectives.

I do not dispute the diffuse Georgian and Victorian sensibility of ‘a society that is always already at war or in the midst of cumulative aftermaths’ (132). However, the evidence for its martial impact on spectatorship from above is, at times, tenuous. Kaplan certainly demolishes any neatly teleological rendering of early balloon flights conjuring a nascent vision of airpower. Rather, she argues, early aeronauts were often distracted by their own bodily sensations and sufferings, permitting little but the most cursory of downward glimpses. Flight, nevertheless, conjointly transformed observers and their observations, subverting both the project and processes of objectivity. The experience of being immersed in the air and subject to its invisible imperatives shaped a novel, flattened ontology. Ballooning ‘generated sensations and brought together people, tools, devices and environments in a uniquely productive mode of being that cannot be summarized as panoptically unified’ (95). Here I was reminded of Vincent Richards’ literary-cultural account, *The Imperial Archive* (1993), which unravelled Victorian fantasies of organising intelligence to manage an empire perennially on the brink of entropic unruliness.

Kaplan certainly makes a valid point that immersive panoramic experiences prospered when they depicted British victories and imperial grandeur. ‘The panorama spectator developed a taste for seeing like a commander ... to savor the burst of empowerment of the view from above without much consideration of what had to be eliminated’ (136). Yet if surveying the battlespace promised similarly commanding perspectives, the perceptual and technical limitations of balloons curtailed their military use throughout the technologically progressive nineteenth century. Reflecting on Paul Virilio’s too-neat conflation of vision with force projection, Kaplan reaches a somewhat contradictory conclusion that ‘[d]espite these brief, uneven and unsatisfactory experimentations ... the direct association between an aerial view and warfare persisted and flourished’ (102). Although I remain incompletely convinced, I did come to acknowledge her contention that spectacular aerial images prosper institutionally precisely because they ‘reinforce the division between war and peace, suggesting that state violence is rational, predictable, and confined to a proscribed space and duration’ (7).

Aerial Aftermaths returns to more stable terrain for the final chapters. Noting the systematic sidelining of the Middle East in accounts of western airpower, Kaplan forensically scrutinises aerial photography of Iraq for operational, colonial and archaeological ends. Ignoring local knowledges and lifeways, the early twentieth century conjunction of aeroplanes, cameras and surveying technologies colluded to efface meaningful features from the desert. This ‘suturing of aesthetics and politics’ (141) crafted an ‘empty map’ discourse which perennially ‘evacuates any coherent political history of the nation before World War I and produces aftermath politics in no small part through continuities of aerial imagery as a key component of air war’ (174). Echoing the survey of the Scottish Highlands, the creation of these nominally blank spaces on maps of Iraq only heightened western misapprehensions of its diverse communities. The

aerial perspective, moreover, fostered the fiction of ‘controlling’ desert dwellers from above with impunity. The aftermath, Kaplan argues, echoed down the decades to the stage-managed televisual spectacle of the First Persian Gulf War in 1990–91. This analysis is convincing, fine-grained and—as with the rest of the book—steeped both in historical detail and up-to-the-minute scholarship.

The many threads of *Aerial Aftermaths* entwine in the final chapter, which considers artistic appropriations of aerial imagery that problematise the panoptic fantasy. Whether re-populating the desert with footprints and air-strike casualties, or re-purposing surveillance images to roll back Israeli territorial gambits, these near-contemporary installations challenge the affectless artifice of views from above. Moreover, they foreground the problematic that fascinates Kaplan: the critical distance intrinsic to aerial surveillance obfuscates as much as it elucidates. There is no total vision, nor does airborne reconnaissance predicate total control. Unruly intensities survive and metastasise under the ‘God’s-eye’ gaze. Aerial images, Kaplan notes, ‘act, produce relationships, and construct evidence in constant tension with their peculiar blind spots’ (181).

This sense of optimistic scepticism pervades *Aerial Aftermaths*. In acknowledging the productive technical capabilities of aerial surveillance, Kaplan refuses to be awed by its presumptive asymmetric potency. Unlike Jean Baudrillard’s rather solipsistic response to the manipulated media of the First Gulf War, her immaculate scholarship provides a satisfyingly empirical tonic. A similar stance flows into her recent volume co-edited with Lisa Parks, *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare* (2017). Kaplan’s insistent—and convincing—message is that the very remoteness of remote sensing inherently excludes meaningful forms of knowledge. Rather than an overdetermined omnipotence, the militarised view from above is blighted by operational, ethical and affective blindness.

In contrast with her critique of this critical distance, Kaplan is fully enmeshed in her field, generously gesturing to the work of fellow scholars through copious citations, acknowledgements and epigraphs. I would have welcomed more engagement with contemporary cultural and political geographers working on airspace and drones, especially Lucy Budd, Alison Williams and Ian Shaw. However, this is a minor quibble. Kaplan’s erudition and deep thought emerge from every page, and her prose is as purposeful and potent as one would expect from a Duke monograph. *Aerial Aftermaths* is a powerful, timely and elegantly crafted book that shrewdly subverts the optics of war.